

## **The Edgar County Courthouse**

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Courthouses in small-town America can be some of the most interesting buildings ever constructed. They are one of the special places where history could be made or changed, and for this alone their value is immeasurable. One such courthouse that is extremely striking, with its octagonal form and statue-topped dome, is the Edgar County Courthouse in Paris, Illinois.

No matter when the particular courthouse was built or where it may stand, all courthouses have one primary purpose: to provide justice to all. However, their appearance can vary dramatically. The oldest courthouses were simple log cabins without even a jury room. (In Abraham Lincoln's day, it was not unusual for jurors to deliberate outside, under the trees.) There are almost no log courthouses left, but some of the brick or stone courthouses that came later survive. These survivors are usually replaced with the modern courthouse, equipped with bulletproof glass and metal detectors. This makes beautiful, old courthouses, such as Edgar County's, even more rare and valuable.

The location of the courthouse was first determined by the location of the county seat. Because the county seat had the only courthouse, tradition held that the seat had to be accessible from all parts of the county by foot in one day. Thus, there were two places eligible for the county seat: Paris or the proposed Cambridge City. The community of Paris, Illinois, began in 1823, when Samuel Vance donated twenty-six acres of land to the public. The Paris site was flat, had good drainage, and was easily cleared; hence, it was chosen as the county seat.

The current courthouse is actually the third courthouse on the same site. The first courthouse was made of wood and was hardly more than one room for the judge to sit in. Built in

1825 for around \$690, it was placed in the center of a town square, with streets and businesses along each side. The courthouse thus became the focal point for the entire community.

Being a wooden structure, the first courthouse did not last very long; hence, a second had to be built. Completed in 1833 at a cost of \$4,250, the second courthouse was two stories high, made of brick, and built in the town square where the first courthouse had been. Both Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas spoke at the second courthouse, as they passed through Paris on separate occasions. One case that Lincoln argued there was *Benson v. Mayo*. In 1851 Harriet Benson sued Milton Mayo for breaching his promise to marry her. She requested \$2,000 in damages, but the jury awarded her \$400, of which she paid \$70 to Lincoln for his legal services. While the second courthouse saw many interesting cases over its lifetime, it finally had to be condemned in 1885.

Eventually the county decided to build a third courthouse. After choosing a design by architect Henry Elliot, the building committee made two contracts that together cost \$104, 807. Construction began in 1891.

Finished in 1893, today's courthouse is much sturdier and more attractive than the earlier two. Made of blue Amherst stone and steel, it also boasts a four-faced clock tower rising 150 feet into the air. On top of the tower is a female statue holding the scales of justice in one hand and facing west, because at the time, the hope of the country was to the west. Over the years the scales have occasionally blown out of her hand, and some brave soul would eventually climb up to put them back. However, the liability risked by such a dangerous task required a new solution. The last time the scales were replaced, they were carefully lowered onto the statue's hand by helicopter.

Elliot's courthouse has four main entrances that are exactly alike, with an overall octagonal shape to the building. As with many of Elliot's other designs, the courthouse is in the Romanesque architectural style, including arches, turrets, and towers. Considered the largest and most ornate example in Illinois, the courthouse's unique combination of these elements caused one Chicago wit to label it "grotesque Gothic."

The Edgar County Courthouse has a basement and three full floors, in addition to the red slate roof, two wraparound decks, a clock tower dome, and the statue of Justice. Court is still held in the two courtrooms to this day. The lower and smaller courtroom is for traffic violations and small claims. The upper, larger courtroom seats 800 and is used for murder trials or serious felonies. Both courtrooms have excellent acoustics. The third floor holds small jury rooms for sequestering juries. Inside the courthouse, the furnishings are beautiful, including marble tiled floors, frescoed ceilings, and large oil murals. Today the courthouse is also used as a government office building.

Various changes had to be made over the years to update the courthouse and maintain it. Security was not as high a priority in the nineteenth century as it is today. In the late 1950s, the county realized it needed to build a "courtroom inside the courtroom," or a type of boxed-in area to protect judges. This was because in the original second-floor courtroom design, the judge was forced to sit with his back to the window, a perfect shooting target in his black robe. In order to make the courthouse handicapped accessible, an elevator was installed in 1970. This cost the county approximately \$100,000, almost as much as it cost to build and furnish the entire courthouse in 1891-93. The Edgar County Historical Society had the large oil paintings fully restored during the 1970s, and in 1981 the building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

For years the Edgar County Courthouse has been the center of Paris, Illinois, and it will be for years to come. This unique building and its square not only has a colorful past, but also appears to have a bright future. The Edgar County Courthouse is what all good courthouses should be, that is, a place where people can find justice and possibly change the course of history, even as they live their daily lives. [From Board of Supervisors, *Souvenir History of Edgar County 1823-1893*; Teddy Day, *A History of the Edgar County Courthouse*; Susan Krause, *From Log Cabins to Temples of Justice*; *Danville Commercial-News*, Mar. 24, 1985; Student Historian's interview with Joe Sanders, Nov. 16, 2003; Philip L. Shutt, *Progress on the Prairie 1823-1973*.]